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CORRESPONDENCE

SHOULD THE ILIAD BE RETAINED IN THE SCHOOLS ?

AFTER a careful perusal of the article with the above title in the January number of the SCHOOL REVIEW, I cannot forbear to say a few words in reply. In so doing, I shall confine myself strictly to a consideration of the objections raised.

First, the dialect. To a school board unacquainted with Homer, or to a school official who has not read the *Iliad*, the array of evidence would at least seem startling, if not sufficient to keep this noble classic out of the public schools. But over against this we place the indisputable fact that pupils master the dialect in a short time, that peculiarities of reflection soon become familiar, and that after a few weeks—three or four at the most—little or no difficulty is experienced. But during this time fully as rapid progress is made as in reading any other author. If thirty-nine pages of finely-printed introductory matter are to be learned before any of the text is translated, then the objection would be valid ; but no teacher would pursue such a method. If the pupil is to master every form, compare all differences of dialects, and use Homer only for purposes of syntax, etymology and philology, then I admit that the *Iliad* should go. But I maintain that such use would be an act of yadalism, a desecration of a noble work of art. As a witty Frenchman has well said, the man that would use Homer as a text-book for parsing, “ would botanize on his mother’s grave.”

There are always difficulties in approaching a new author. Every writer has his own vocabulary, construction, thought-forms, and environment. With these the pupil must become familiar before rapid progress is possible. Now the practical question is, whether the pupil finds greater difficulty passing from Xenophon to Homer, than from Caesar to Cicero, or from Cicero to Virgil. Caesar and Cicero differ widely in subject-matter, style, construction, and environment. The one is a continuous narrative of wars and rumors of war ; the other is argumentative, impassioned. Cicero is more difficult in etymology, syntax, interpretation, and environment. Applying these tests to the transition from Xenophon to Homer, we find that in dialect only does the *Iliad* present greater difficulties : for the style is simpler, the syntax less complex, the interpretation easier, and the environment fascinating.

But what of the content ? If the book, after all, is unfit for boys and girls to read, we need not concern ourselves about the dialect. Mr. Matthews is not the pioneer in this field ; for, after reading the able criticism on the contents of the *Iliad*, I at once took down my Plato, which gives us, from the view-point of the Greek purist, the only valid objection to the *Iliad*. The third book of the *Republic* contains, however, a much fuller criticism. Plato’s purpose is to remove from all literature everything that is suggestive of evil, impiety, or wrong-doing in any form. From the days of the Old Academy this same question has appeared in many forms.

We grant that there are a few indelicate situations ; every reader of the *Iliad* knows that. But are these numerous enough to mar the poem and render it unwholesome for pupils to read ? God forbid that I should be a “ corrupter of the youth ! ”

Yet with all modesty and self-respect, yes, with some degree of self-commendation, I have taught this poem to pure-minded boys and girls without bringing a blush to the cheek of the most modest. Moreover, we must not lightly impute to the noble-minded men and women of the past and present a disregard for the moral welfare of the rising generation.

By the time the *Anabasis* is completed, the pupil certainly cannot be corrupted by any such transparent trick as that which Zeus (not Jupiter) played upon Agamemnon. A year's acquaintance with Clearchus, that prince of Spartan deception, with the still craftier Tissaphernes, "that most faithless and godless of men," with Xenophon, the master of sophistry, is, I affirm, an ample propædæutic to anything that Homer sings about. Looked at in one way, the *Anabasis* abounds in bribery, fratricide, lying, deception, adultery, treachery, and murder. Taken all in all, a much worse case can be made out against Xenophon than has been brought against Homer. And yet no one raises an objection to reading the *Anabasis*, no one need object.

If Homer must go, he certainly will have noble company. Xenophon doubtless will attend him; Shakespeare, too, must go, for he pictures some indelicate situations, uses some exceedingly naughty words, and portrays some ugly characters. What shall we say of Spenser, Dante, Virgil, the *Nibelungen Lied*? We must teach nothing of that book which tells of Joseph and of David. The subject of classical mythology must be dropped; ancient history must be rewritten; all our text-books in history and literature must be revised.

For my part, I believe that Mr. Matthews' fears are groundless, and that his argument, when carried to its logical conclusion, proves entirely too much.

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